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International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

Fall 10-1-2001

Writing Sample

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Recommended Citation

Warriar, Shashi, "Writing Sample" (2001). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 28.
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Prologue

“They call it the drop.

The warders have a little table for it, to tell you what distance the condemned man must fall with the noose around his neck, for him to die cleanly. Experts say that he must fall just enough to gather sufficient momentum for the rope to break his neck. If the body falls too far, the rope cuts into the neck, and might even sever the head. If the body doesn't fall long enough, the neck won't break and the man will die of strangulation, taking several minutes over it. So, the heavier the man, the shorter the drop.

I know the table by heart. If the man weighs under 44 kilos, he should drop 1.98 metres. If he weighs between 44 and 57 kilos, the drop should be 1.83 metres. Between 57 and 70 kilograms, the drop comes down to 1.68 metres. And a man weighing over 70 kilos need drop only 1.52 metres.

It's hard to think of it as a table like this. The British worked it out as a rule thumb: I think it was a drop of six and a half feet for a man weighing a hundred pounds, and six inches less for every thirty pounds extra weight. When they converted the measurement into kilograms and centimetres the table changed to these clumsy numbers that we have now. I am uncomfortable with centimeters and kilograms, I prefer to use the pounds and inches they taught me at school.

The precision of the table is misleading. To get the drop exactly right, you need to know the height of the knot, the height of the beam over which the rope is passed, and the length of the drop itself. And when you have measured the height of the condemned man, you must subtract from it the length of his head. But they don't do all that. They don't even weigh the man just before hanging him; they weigh him once a month while he is in the condemned cell.

But no hangman worth his salt needs the table, or a weighing scale, or a measuring tape. He can judge the weight of the man to within five pounds, and then work out the length of the drop to within an inch.

Measuring out the rope is easy: one span of my right hand is exactly eight and a half inches. I use that to measure off the required length. The horizontal beam from which the man hangs is a little over nine feet high – thirteen hand spans – above the trap door. To that I add one hand-span or more, depending on the condemned man's size, for the slack in the rope needed to ensure that the man's head is just below the level of the trap door at the end of his fall. Since I can guess a man's height to an inch and his weight to a pound, the rest is easy.

With a very heavy man, especially a tall one, I make the drop longer than the book says. Anyone who has seen me hanging a tall man will know this. According to the book, a six footer weighing 70 kilos need drop only five feet. But if a tall man only falls five feet, his head will be visible above the trap door afterwards, and that I cannot bear to think about. The face hidden behind a mask of cloth, of course, but I have seen a man's tongue swelling behind the mask. That is why I make sure that a tall man always has a little extra slack, and that is why the warders, who know this, do not protest.

I know these lengths so well that a look at the condemned man suffices; I can do the rest blindfold.

Measuring out the rope, testing it, tying the knots – I do these things well. I have learnt to do them well because I concentrate on them as best I can, because if I don't my mind will find its way to the man about to die, and then I will have no peace...”

The letter came on a wet August morning as I sat reading this passage for the twenty-fifth time. It was a cheap yellow postcard with a single line in Tamil, a language that I had only recently begun to learn. I read very slowly, but the message was clear at first glance.

"Come immediately," it said. The name was familiar, as was the address at the bottom of the sheet, but the handwriting was strange.

The address was the home of the hangman, who lived some four hundred kilometres south, in another state. I hadn't heard from him in a while and our last meeting had been stormy. I had returned from his home and written off the project on which we had been working together since sometime in the summer.

And now this letter. It was in someone else's handwriting. What had happened to the old man?

"Come immediately." It was just short of eleven, and there was a train at half-past-two. If I took that train I'd be there late, towards midnight. I'd check into a small hotel and follow up early next morning. I sat thinking and looking at the wet hillside for another hour, then went inside to pack and eat.

Before I left I made a telephone call, to a lady several hundred kilometres away, to tell her about the letter.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"I'm on my way," I replied.

"Do you want me along?" she asked.

"Not yet," I replied. "But if the going gets heavy I'll call you."

She had been on the project ever since the beginning, and had even pushed me along when I was on the verge of giving it up.

"Call me as soon as you know what's happening," she said.

It was nearly one when I left, and I made it just in time to Shoranur railway station. The hours passed. The rain died out and people in the train opened the windows to let in the cool, damp air. At night the moon appeared briefly between clouds sliding smoothly north east, and glinted off ponds with reeds waving on their banks.

And all the while I wondered whether the hangman had kept his word. I wouldn't know until I got there. Time passed slowly.

I saw him in my mind's eye as I had seen him last, a man of average height for those parts, some five feet five inches tall, with long wavy grey hair and a grey beard that reached midway down his chest. He was thin, with a prominent nose that stuck out of his face like a cleaver, and a hangdog expression about him that was somehow engaging. He was dressed in a clean but shabby white shirt, with a saffron lungi knotted about his waist. His hands were those of a bigger man, the thick strong fingers like knobbly tree roots. His feet were bare and rough, and one look at them told you that he had always been barefoot.

The image faded. How could I have believed that such a man would write a book?

There was a bus ready and waiting when the train reached Trivandrum at about ten, and at that time of the night we made good time to the temple town of Nagercoil, just short of the Cape. I found a small, cheap hotel, and fell exhausted into bed. For all the weariness, though, sleep didn't come. The same question kept pounding in my head through the night: had the hangman kept his word? I wouldn't know till morning. I woke before the dawn and lay restless and tossing impatient to reach the hangman. At eight I took a bus to Parvathipuram, getting off at a small junction where a canal flows under cross roads.

The rain began again and I brought the umbrella out of my backpack. The wind whipped spray all over my trousers as I squelched through the mud without a qualm. All along the way the earth seemed to burst with life. Weeds grew thickly on both sides of the path, and in the paddy fields little shoots stuck tender heads above rippling surfaces of muddy water. Wet banana leaves gleamed even in the cloud-dimmed light of the grey morning, and the birds kept silent.

The hangman's house, when I reached it, seemed smaller and quieter than it had been the last time I came. The old dog in the yard was gone, and when the gate squeaked open the face that appeared at the door wasn't the hangman's but his son's.

He nodded at me, but when I reached the door the welcome ended. "You must have got my letter," he said. I could see he wasn't enthusiastic about having me around. There was a hint of anger in his dark eyes.

"I got it yesterday, and started immediately."

He nodded again. "*Amma* wanted to write you as soon as it happened but I thought it better to let you know only later."

"As soon as what happened?" I asked. The pounding of my heart was louder. What was this man talking about?

"Appa's passing." The anger in his eyes intensified.

I went cold all over. Here it was, the end. He had died before he could keep his promise. Stupid, I said to myself. I should have followed up earlier. There was a new weight in my chest. "I'm sorry," I said. "How did he go? When?"

"He died two weeks ago... in the morning. He woke up and had his coffee and lay down in the middle of the morning and never woke up again."

"Did he suffer?"

"No. He just lay down to sleep and never got up again. *Amma* found him."

Almost as if on cue she appeared around the corner of the house, asking, "Who's there?" She saw me and hesitated: I noticed she was dressed in white. Widow's white.

"I found out only just now," I told her. "I'm sorry. I would have liked to be here for the last rites."

Her eyes were red and heavy but the worst of her grief was past. She nodded. "At least he went quietly," she said. "No trouble." Suddenly there were fresh tears in her eyes and she wiped them away with a bony, dark hand. She told me what he had said when he woke up on his last morning, and pointed out the spot where he had sat to drink his coffee. She showed me the worn shirt he took off before he lay down for the last time. She spoke of the quiet in his eyes in his last few days. She showed me where they had cut down a tree for the wood to cremate him, and which neighbours came first when they heard her wails. She spoke of him sometimes as if he were still alive, and I listened patiently.

When she was through, she turned to her son, her youngest child. "Did you give him the packet?" she asked.

He shook his head. "He just arrived when you came and started talking to him," he said.

She was angry. "How can you keep him waiting at the door like this? Give him his packet. That's what you called him for, isn't it?"

The son disappeared into the darkness of the house, grumbling, and she turned to me. He was happy when he went. He left something for you. He told us to give it to you." She paused. "Those books of yours. He was busy with them all along. He said he was finished with them, that he would send them to you in a day or two, but he was gone before he could do that."

The son reappeared with a large yellow plastic bag in his hands. In it were notebooks, seven of them, and a pen. I reached inside to pick up the pen. "This is for you," I said, offering to them. "I gave it to him."

The widow smiled and shook her head. "What will we do with it? Besides, he said it's for you. He said that everything in the bag is for you. It's yours."

"Thank you. Where's his dog?"

"He's also gone. A few days ago. In his sleep. He, too, just lay down quietly, and never got up again."

I nodded. There was a lump in my throat, but I couldn't wait to get back to the hotel room and see what was in those notebooks. She must have sensed my impatience. "Go," she said. "Go on. Read the books. Do well."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the son looking resentfully at me. I put the books and the pen in my pack and turned and walked away. I opened the gate and stepped out into the slush that was the road. At the corner I turned, and saw the two of them, mother and son, standing still, watching me. I lifted a hand in a wave and they waved back. Then the rain came heavily down and I never saw them again.

Back in the hotel room I started on the notebooks. There were seven of them, all numbered in English in his sprawling childish hand. The contents were in Tamil. I could just barely read the language, but I started immediately. There were words that I couldn't understand, but I got the general drift of it very quickly. Some of it I'd read before, and that made it easier. Later I'd get my friend, the lady who had helped me with the project, to translate the notes for me.

The hangman had written his notes as neatly as he could. His writing became a little smoother as he wrote, but not much: you can't expect a the hand of a man of seventy-four to improve dramatically. It was mostly a journal, a diary, and in it he had put down some of the matters that weighed most upon his mind. This is what I read.

Chapter One

They came at the worst possible time, at two on an afternoon in late April when the summer's sun was getting to be its pitiless worst.

Chellammal, my wife, was away at a friend's house: she comes and goes as she pleases, and I stopped interfering with her long ago because she does as she wants anyway. There was never anything in my house to steal, just a few pots and pans and clothes and sticks of furniture, so I left the door open always. I was alone in the backyard, looking at the parched fields, at the soil caking hard, cracking with thirst. Beside the fields, a coconut plantation and a mango orchard, both retaining their green cover, gave an illusion of lushness from above. But when you looked closely, the soil underneath was bone dry, its moisture sucked out by the hungry sun.

Despite the heat that hung harshly over the land I was smoking a beedi, my fifth of the day: these small vices make an old man's summer bearable. My dog, a stray that had walked into the yard one night some years ago, came skulking up to my side. He was thick-limbed and stiff with age, but still strong, though his eyes were beginning to go. He lay at my feet with a small grunt of satisfaction, panting hard, his tongue out.

In the stillness of the afternoon there was little noise: the heat brings with it a terrible sluggishness that affects everything that lives- the cattle, the dogs, and even the kites that drift high above. As for me, I don't sleep much. There was little I could do but sit still, too lethargic to do anything, but unable to doze off. It's an old man's habit.

I sat in the warm shade and let my mind drift. sometimes when something happens you think that you will never forget it. You think you'll never forget your

wedding, for instance but I've forgotten... I'd forgotten even what my wife looked like on our wedding day, and on the rare occasions I looked at my wedding photographs I thought it was a pair of strangers in there. I've forgotten the day I first went to school, though I remember one of the schoolmasters very well. My memory is unpredictable, for sometimes the smallest of incidents lingers on in my mind far longer than it should. I still remember for instance the call of the raven from high above when we were doing the last rites for my father, but I don't remember my father's face clearly. Sometimes my memory irritates me: I remember a face in great detail, features and wrinkles and all, but can't put a name to it or even the context in which I saw it.

So these random memories were all I lived with, and I had grown fond of them, for though they betrayed me once in a while they were my only friends... How true they were was another matter.

These memories and an approaching blackness- a sort of heavy blackness. I often wondered what it was. Was it the sadness that caught my father when he was past seventy, as I am now? I wondered, though I had felt it since I was sixty.

I heard the car from far away, a distant hum that grew and sometimes stopped, perhaps when they stopped to ask for directions. The sound interrupted my thoughts, which took a long time to get back together. This made the people in the car intruders, whoever they were. Who were they, anyway, I thought, and whom did they want to meet? My neighbours are poor, as am I; we have nothing to do with wealthy people who have cars. Who would want to visit one of us?

A few minutes later I heard the car stop, and the doors slam shut. There were voices then, a man and a woman, speaking in English, a language that I can recognise but don't understand. They seemed to be nearby, so I went slowly around my small two-room house, the dog following stiffly and found at my gate two young strangers. The man was tall and fat and bearded and bespectacled, the woman thin and fair-skinned, with red lips. As I watched, the dog went up to the woman, who was leading, and began to sniff at her skirt.

She did not fear him. She bent and patted his head, scratching him behind his ears, just where he likes to be scratched. He grunted in pleasure and went still. She straightened up, looking hesitantly at me. "Do you know where Janardhanan Pillai lives?" she asked in Tamil. Her Tamil was chaste, the language of the wealthy, not the earthy sing-song that you hear around my house.

"Yes," I replied. I answered the question but volunteered nothing.

She waited for a few seconds before she asked, "Where does he live, then?"

I pointed at the small whitewashed house with the thatch roof. "Here."

"Janardhanan Pillai, the hangman? The aratchar?"

"Yes," I said. "The aratchar. He lives here."

She looked me up and down, and hesitated again. "Do you know him?" she asked.

I couldn't evade any more. "I am him," I replied.

Her tone changed a little, the relief showing. "We come from far away," she said. "We have been looking for your house for most of the day... We must have asked at a dozen places, disturbed a dozen others."

"What do you want from me?" I asked. No one comes far unless they want something, and these people must have wanted it very badly, whatever it was, to come out here in the heat and on these bad roads.

She looked me in the eye. "Words," she said, briefly.

For the first time I felt a spark of curiosity. "What words?" I asked.

"My friend is a writer," she replied. "He seeks your words."

They must have prepared for this meeting. "Why does he not speak for himself?"

I asked. "What man would have a woman speak for him?"

"A man who does not know the language," she said. She smiled then, a smile of relief that I had not turned them away forthwith.

Some of my anger dissolved in that smile. I am old but when a beautiful young woman smiles at me I still respond. This one was a little too thin, and her face was painted, but she was still quite beautiful. "What is his language, then?" I asked.

"Malayalam?" They speak Malayalam in Kerala, only forty kilometres away.

"He speaks Malayalam," she said, "but he writes in English."

People like this had come before. They had taken photographs, and they had written about me, most in Tamil, a few in Malayalam, and one or two in English. I had been happy and proud at first to see my face in the newspapers, to read about myself, but very soon it became unimportant, for they never said anything that mattered. "From which newspaper?" I asked.

"None," she replied. "He wants to write a whole book about you."

"A book." The others had come and sat and talked for hours just to produce a quarter of a page in a newspaper. How much time of mine would this man take, I wondered, to write a book of a few hundred pages. But the idea was attractive.

Deep in my heart I had wanted all along to write a book. To write my own book. I had thought about my book for a quarter-century, but never put down a word. I had thought vaguely that there was enough in my mind for a good story. And always I had postponed writing it, not knowing why. Now, perhaps, the time had come to write it. And this man was there, for me to learn from.

"What will he call the book?" I asked.

"Hangman's Journal," she replied. "The publishers suggested the name. It seems all right. He will write it as if you are writing it: a first person narrative."

"A book about me, written by a stranger half my age pretending to be me," I repeated. It seemed funny, but I didn't think they'd see the humour. "How long will it take?"

She didn't reply immediately. When you are old as I am, and have seen a lifetime of lies, it is easy to tell when someone was lying to you. I saw the hesitation in her eyes, and then a decision to tell the truth. "He will probably take six to eight months to write the book," she explained.

"And will it be printed soon after that?"

She shook her head. Again there eight months more. Perhaps a year .was the hesitation, followed by the truth. "Perhaps six to

"Will it have my photograph on the cover?" Fifteen or twenty years ago it would have made a difference, but no longer. I had no desire to be in the public eye. All the same, I did want to know if these people would try to evade.

Again there was the hesitation, and then the truth afterwards. "I don't know."

"And will he make a lot of money out of it?"

"He does not know," she explained. "Writing... If you write you must be prepared to be poor."

"If he is poor, how does he have a car?"

"It's not his car," she explained. "It's mine. I like his writing, so I help him when I can."

"And what are you to him?" I asked.

"An old friend who likes books, and a distant relative... I've known him since he was two."

I looked more closely and suddenly I knew that the woman was older, though she didn't look it... They were colleagues of a sort. It seemed very common in recent years. A few years ago a girl came, from a magazine. With her came a photographer, a young man. God knows what the world is coming to: in my youth you wouldn't see a man and a woman travelling together unless they were married. At least two were related. "So what will I get out of it?" I asked. Here they were, asking me to help with a book, a book yet to be written, saying that writing does not pay. What did they think they could give me to persuade me to give them the words?

"I don't know," she replied. "I thought you would be pleased to have a book written about you... But he is willing to share the money that he will get for it."

"What share?"

"Half for you. Half for him."

They had prepared thoroughly for this meeting then, for she spoke without consulting him.

Again it struck me that these two were very close, very close in mind and then it didn't seem odd, their being here together. Half the money sounded good, but I knew that half of nothing is nothing. "How much would that be?"

"Let me confirm with him," she said. They spoke in English, and he nodded. Again she smiled.

"You'll get a minimum of five thousand rupees, maybe more."

Five thousand for me was not bad, even if I had to spend a month with the writer. "Is that all he gets?" I asked.

"He gets a royalty after that, some money for each book sold, but what he gets is adjusted against the advance."

So it was possible that he wouldn't get anything after that advance. I looked carefully at the man. His clothes were poor, not much better than mine, cheap cotton. He was young, in his middle to late thirties. They both looked earnest, and they had taken a lot of trouble. But could I trust them? They would come and take my words and disappear. "Only half?" I asked, playing for time. "The words are mine, he just writes them down... And for that he gets half? That doesn't sound right."

She turned to explain to him but he held up a hand: he knew enough to understand what I said. I could see it in his eyes. He spoke, firmly and briefly, and she said to me, "This book is not about money, he says. This is about your mind, your soul. If you are going to talk you will talk regardless of the money."

He was right: he could see that the money wasn't important. Maybe he needed it more than I did. "All right," I said. "Let's talk for a while. We'll decide later about whether I'll help with the book and how much money you pay me." I paused. "Let's go into the house."

The man spoke again, bending towards the woman. An ordinary voice, as deep as one would expect from a man his size. She nodded at him, then turned to ask me, "Would you mind sitting outside, in the shade?"

"As you wish," I said. "Why?"

"He wants to get a feel for the land," she replied. "He likes to sit and watch."

"Why does he want to do that?"

"To get a sense of your origins, of your background."

"All right." I didn't mind. From outside the interior of the house looked dark and deceptively cool: inside, it would be stifling. That was why I was outside in the first place. "I'll get chairs."

"Don't bother," the woman said. "We can sit there." She pointed at a lump of concrete by the house.

So there we sat, me in the doorway and the two of them on the concrete, facing me. I saw the curiosity in his eyes then. In the eyes of the others there was reserve, and sometimes pity. In some there was awe, and in others horror. But in this man there was nothing but curiosity. He came with an empty mind.

"So what do you want me to tell you?" I asked the man. It was clear that he understood simple Tamil, that the woman would interpret the long words and the nuances.

He spoke to the woman in English, and she turned to me to ask, "If the hundred and seventeen people you hanged could hear you today, what would you tell them?"

Strange question to start with. The others, the ones from the newspapers, asked about the rituals and the rope and how it was done, and added on at the end a question about how it felt. This man was starting with the heart of the matter. I thought in silence for a moment, but nothing surfaced in my mind. I have, after all, been asking myself this same question for the past quarter-century and have not yet found an answer. I shook my head. "Later," I said. "Ask me something else now. I'll have to think about it."

The man spoke in her ear, and she asked. "Haven't you thought about it all along?"

"Yes," I smiled at their youth. "Very little else, these past few years, since I retired."

"Well..." she said, cocking an eyebrow at me.

"For some questions you don't get easy answers. Ask me something else."

They spoke again, and she said, "But this is the most important question. Unless he has some kind of a beginning of an answer he won't be able to write the book."

"Why not?" I asked, trying to draw him towards the circus of rituals. "There was a lot of ritual in the old days."

He tapped her wrist. I think he didn't understand the word I used for ritual. She explained to him, and he spoke a question to her. She shook her head at him, but then turned to me. "He says he knows that you are the only one who knows about what it was in the days of the King, and afterwards. That is why he has come to you. He asks, from your point of view, did it make a difference?"

That was easy to answer. "No," I said. "It made no difference who gave the orders, the King or the government that followed him. After I'd said this, I felt that it wasn't entirely true, but I let it be."

She translated for him again. There was a smile on his face when he told her his question. She shook her head again, the bell of hair dancing about her head, and I heard him repeat himself. "Difficult question," she said to me. "He says that if it made no difference who gave the orders, the rituals don't matter. Isn't that so?"

"That might be so," I said, feeling trapped. "Tell me, what do you really want from me?"

He understood that question. He spoke to her for some time, for nearly three minutes, as far as I could judge, with many gestures of his hands. He had restless hands, this one, but his eyes were very focused.

She heard him out in silence. "He says he wants to look at your point of view on executions, on life. He has read a little of the ritual but is not satisfied. People in this country have looked at the minds of condemned men. They have looked at the minds of prison officials and the judges who have delivered sentences of death. But no one has done that with the hangman. He wants to look in your mind and write a book about it."

He was asking of me the hardest question of them all. I didn't have the strength right then to speak to him. I rose from my doorstep and stretched. "I'm tired now," I told them. "Let me think about things a little more."

"When should we come next?" the man asked abruptly in his accented Tamil. His impatience showed.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"In Nagercoil, for the time being," she replied. "On West Car Street, near the snake temple in the heart of the town. I have relatives there, and so does he."

"Come back in two days," I said. "And come in the morning. If you come in the morning I will be able to offer you coffee."

"The day after tomorrow? About eleven in the morning?" he asked, still groping for the right word.

I liked that, the way he groped for words. He seemed like a man who tried hard to get things right. "Yes," I told him. "The day after tomorrow. At eleven... "

Chapter Two

I see the steps first, the irregular stone steps leading into the dark well below the trapdoor. All around is the soft darkness before the dawn, and a powdering of bright stars in the patches of sky above. There is light also from the powerful lamps all over the premises, the lamps that keep the night from taking over. From far away comes the sound of drums, rising and falling on a fugitive chill wind that I can feel on my cheek.

In the darkness of the well lurks something... Lurks a menace I cannot name. I turn from the well to look for reassurance in the familiar faces of my adiyaans, my mates, my assistants, who a few moments ago accompanied me into the gallows enclosure along with the guards, and the man in the mask

They are gone. I am alone.

No, not quite alone. On the trapdoor, with the noose above him, stands the man in the mask. His striped uniform is crisp and fresh, and he stands very still. The rope is a clean bright white that seems to have a glow of its own. The knots at his ankles are neatly tied, compact, the work of someone who knows his ropes well. I cannot see his arms, they are tied behind him, as they should be. I have a vague memory of having tied those knots myself a long time ago. Some years ago.

There is something strange about the mask. The beat of the faraway drums rises and I see what is wrong. The mask is too flat. There should be at least one protuberance, where the man's nose sticks out, but on this mask there is none: it is flat. In a moment of insight I know that there is no face behind the mask.

The mask is the face.

The terror rises. I have to get away from here, from the monster in the well and the faceless one on the trapdoor.

The solid iron door to the gallows enclosure is less than thirty feet away, but I cannot run, no matter how hard I try. I move painfully slowly towards the door, but when I reach it I see that it is locked with a large and solid padlock that I can't even move. I go to the other door, the small one through which they pass the body to relatives waiting outside, but that too is locked with a similar padlock. I look at the walls around me: they are all at least twelve feet high, and smooth, offering no escape.

Some foreboding makes me turn around, and there is the man in the mask, the flat mask, his arms and legs free. I feel his hands tighten about my neck, powerful hands that I can't pry loose. I cannot breathe... I try to close my eyes and shut out the flat mask but I cannot. As I begin to sink to my knees my heart threatens to burst in my chest.

I came awake gasping for breath. It must have been a silent nightmare. Chellammal slept peacefully a few feet away. She normally snores mightily for such a small woman but that night she was silent, face-down.

It was stifling inside the house, and there were mosquitoes drifting in through the open windows. Not a breath of breeze stirred the leaves outside, and the world was still and black-and-silver and comforting. My torso was wet with sweat, as was the mat on which I have been lying. I put my hands on the floor to raise myself: my body was lighter than it had been in my youth yet it felt much heavier. I moved slowly to the kitchen to get a drink of water from the pot on shelf. I should have been able to find my way around this house blindfold but I could not. I had to grope for the bolt at the top of the door, and it took all my remaining strength to slide it down quietly. It was too dark for me to see the time in the clock but I could tell from the quality of light outside that it is early morning: perhaps two. Three hours to dawn.

I went out with my mat. There was a slight shifting breeze, just enough to make you wish it weren't there because when it stops you are left miserable. I spread my mat on the ground in the open - they used to say in my childhood, never sleep under a tree at night - and stretched out to look at the stars.

Once I could see individual stars. Now I saw only dim glowing patches in the sky, that was all. I remember: in the nightmare the stars were sharp as I saw them in the days when I ruled the gallows. It isn't just my eyes. My hearing, too, has gone, and my nose: but that was because of the beedis, not old age.

I lay there and drifted back to the days when the stars were sharp in the sky and the smell of woodsmoke from the kitchen sharp in my nostrils. What did I think of in those days? There was a parade of memories, and the familiar blackness, but nothing else. I dreaded the prospect of the writer's visit. Why couldn't they leave me in peace? But I knew I couldn't turn them away. The writer asked the same question I asked myself. Several times I thought I knew the answer, but something happened that taught me that the answer was false.

The writer and the woman... I felt a tinge of envy. In their talk I could see a closeness of mind. They shared their thoughts. I had lived longer than both of them put together but in all my life I'd had to keep everything to myself. Whom could I share with? A sense of desperate loneliness gripped me.

A book. That was attractive. Maybe I could pour it all out to the writer, the nightmares and the blackness and the disconnected bits of memory that an old man has.

The more I thought of it that dark morning the more attractive the idea seemed.

When they come I will talk to them, I thought. There will be much in what I say that will be unclear, much that is confused, much that is repeated. Well, let the writer take care of all that. That is his job. The only thing that worried me was that he would write in English, a language I did not know. If he twisted anything I said and put it in his book, it would reflect on me and my sons. And what if the book told lies but I died before it was out? The only good side of it was that none of my people would know about the lies because none of them read books in English. But what if it did well and a translation came?

Trust was difficult. Trusting a stranger was doubly difficult.

The nightmare came to mind, the man in the flat mask, with his hands at my throat. I had told no one about him. Would I dare tell anyone who cared to listen? Sharing secrets with strangers was difficult.

But I had never shared any of this with those close to me, and I thought it might be worth trying.

I came to a decision then, in the breeze rising from the sea, that I would speak to the writer. The decision made, I lay back. And slept soundly through the rest of the night.
